

United States Department of Justice

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UTAH OPERATION TARGETS NETWORK
SELLING STOLEN NATIVE AMERICAN
ARTIFACTS

***INDICTMENTS UNSEALED, ARRESTS MADE IN CASE
INVOLVING 256 ARTIFACTS, TOTALING \$335,685, MOST
TAKEN FROM PUBLIC, INDIAN LANDS***

SALT LAKE CITY -- Twelve indictments charging 23 defendants with violations of the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA) and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)

were unsealed this morning in Salt Lake City following an undercover operation targeting a network of individuals allegedly involved in the sale, purchase, and exchange of artifacts illegally taken, in most cases, from public or Indian lands.

The indictments were announced this morning in Salt Lake City by the Deputy Attorney General David W. Ogden of the U.S. Department of Justice; Ken Salazar, Secretary of the Interior; Brett L. Tolman, U.S. Attorney in Utah; Timothy J. Fuhrman, Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's Salt Lake City Field Office; and Larry EchoHawk, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs.

The indictments follow a more than two-year investigation lead by agents from the FBI and BLM. Arrest warrants for 22 of the defendants were executed Wednesday along with 12 search warrants. In addition to ARPA and NAGPRA violations, the indictments also include charges of theft of government property, depredation of government property, and theft of Indian tribal property. The investigation involves law enforcement efforts in the Four Corners region. The indictments unsealed today were returned by a grand jury in Utah and charge defendants in Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado. A list of defendants and the charges they face is included as an attachment to this press release.

"These archaeological treasures are precious and protecting them preserves a rich history and heritage. That is why the Justice Department will use all of its tools to vigorously enforce the laws designed to safeguard the cultural heritage of Native Americans," said Deputy Attorney General Ogden. "Recommitting resources and focus to criminal justice in Indian Country is of paramount importance to the Justice Department. We are currently conducting a training initiative with the Interior Department for federal prosecutors and law enforcement personnel on looting, vandalism, and illegal trafficking of cultural heritage, and are planning to launch a listening tour with Indian Country leaders in the near future that will produce ongoing consultation on these issues."

"Let this case serve notice to anyone who is considering breaking these laws and trampling our nation's cultural heritage that the BLM, the Department of Justice, and the federal government will track you down and bring you to justice," said Secretary Salazar. "As these alleged criminals are

prosecuted and as federal agents continue to hunt down wrong doers, BLM cultural resources staff will work to ensure the proper recovery, identification, repatriation, and storage of the artifacts that have been confiscated.

The Four Corners region, rich in archaeological resources, contains artifacts that are vitally important to the scientific, academic, and Native American communities. The illegally obtained relics include decorated Anasazi pottery, an assortment of burial and ceremonial masks, a buffalo headdress, and ancient sandals known to be associated with Native American burials. Additionally, improperly excavated archeological sites mean a significant amount of historical information is lost because the artifacts are not identified in the context of where they were located.

“The indictments unsealed today charge a group of defendants, largely excavators, dealers, and collectors, with very serious violations of federal law,” U.S. Attorney Tolman said today. “Those who loot or damage public resources for their own personal use or gain take something from all of us. These treasures are the heritage of all Americans, and some of the objects are sacred to Native Americans. The notion that you can take whatever you want from public lands is wrong. Those engaged in this kind of conduct will be investigated and prosecuted,” Tolman said.

“The FBI has taken this matter seriously and spent a significant amount of personnel and financial resources in exposing this network of individuals illegally trafficking in these items,” said FBI Special Agent in Charge Fuhrman. “The FBI remains committed to devoting all necessary resources to address this problem.”

The FBI, BLM and U.S. Marshals, joined by local and state law enforcement partners, were simultaneously arresting defendants and executing search warrants Wednesday morning. Defendants will have initial appearances before U.S. Magistrate Judge Samuel Alba at the Grand County Courthouse in Moab Wednesday. The U.S. Attorney’s Office is seeking to detain one of the defendants. The others will be ordered to maintain and store in current condition all artifacts in their possession and engage in reasonable efforts to protect them from damage, destruction, loss or theft. One defendant is not being arrested and will be issued a summons to appear in federal court.

ARPA prohibits the unauthorized excavation and removal of archaeological resources on federal lands as well as the unlawful sale, purchase, or exchange of such resources. Under NAGPRA, any Native American human remains, funerary objects, objects of cultural patrimony and sacred objects must be repatriated to Indian tribes. The BLM will consult with tribes to determine cultural affiliation and to facilitate repatriation. For artifacts not subject to NAGPRA, the BLM will work with museums to stabilize, identify, and preserve them under the provisions of ARPA, and make them available for scientific research and public education.

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